

Never Let Me Go

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Summary: When a Zoroark stumbles across a prime example of human cruelty, it will change many lives. When your life has been utterly destroyed, and everything you know taken from you, how do you go on? Sometimes, all you need is someone who cares . . . Rated for some blood, disturbing images and themes.

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by

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The forest was peaceful, a gentle breeze softly brushed through the trees and bushes. The soft calls of Pidgey could be heard now and again. The woods were peaceful. A single figure moved through the bracken and branches with an ease and familiarity that was unmatched.

Dark fur, surmounted by an impressive mane of red, shining sapphire eyes, accented by red coloring around them, almost like war paint or make up. The Zoroark moved through the woods with complete ease and freedom, her beloved home. She had called these woods home for as long as she could remember, ever since she was born. She knew where every rock, creek, canyon, mountain, cave, bush and tree was. She knew which trees held tasty nuts, and which bushes yielded sweet berries. She knew what types of PokÃ©mon lived there, where they lived, how they behaved. Likewise, they knew her. Most left her alone, but a few she might call friends. The very few who might pose a threat she kept away from, and if they knew what was good for them, they would do likewise.

She came to stand in a small glade, not quite big enough to really be

called a clearing, but it let her look up at the bright blue sky and take a deep breath of the fresh mountain air. It was a beautiful day, the air was warm and soft. Soft, fluffy white clouds lazily drifted through the sky without a care.

Suddenly, a sound she had never heard echoed through the mountains. It was loud, like a clap of thunder. The sound bounced off the cliffs and trees, coming to her sensitive ears as they perked up. She looked up, and the clouds were still fluffy and white, not a hint of gray to them, and no scent was on the wind of storms or rain. Her ears laid back as she moved to investigate.

She was hardly a whisper in the underbrush as she moved through the forest. The sound came again, guiding her. She wound her way through the forest and along the cliffs. She heard the sound again, louder than before.

"_Get up, you scum!"_ a harsh voice echoed. She hid behind a bush and growled softly at the sound of a human voice.

Humans rarely ever came to this place. There was a small human town further down in the mountains, but they pretty much never came near the forest. They stayed closer to their own home. That was good. Her head told her to go back to the forest, leave the humans to whatever they did. Something, though, made her want to see what it was they were doing. She softly growled and began to carefully gather energy for illusions to hide herself with. As she moved closer, and heard more angry voices, and heard the strange sound again, she thought on how little she had seen humans.

She had seen some hikers before, and even a few Pok  mon trainers, but she had always stayed hidden. Her father had said humans were hard to peg, and warned her to be careful. He had told her some humans were more evil than anything she could fathom, and cruel beyond words. Others, he said, were so kind as to seem unearthly. Despite that, he told her to always be careful around them, and always watch and judge, and keep hidden. "The best fight is the one avoided" he said, and she agreed.

She always wondered how her father knew so much about them, but he would never answer when she asked. She could see it pained him. The mention of Pok  mon trainers made him particularly sad.

She was brought out of her thoughts as she neared the bottom of a steep cliff, angled as it climbed upwards. She heard the sound again, and now, she could smell the scent of the humans. She also could smell something that made her stop and growl: blood. She heard the fierce crack again, louder than ever before, and a smell that made her nose scrunch up. It reminded her of when she smelled a lightning strike. It was a burned smell.

"_No food for that one!"_ shouted an angry voice, followed by another crack. She vaguely could hear a cry of pain.

"_This one's dead,"_ said another voice, not angry, but seeming disappointed.

"_Then get rid of 'em! Before they stink up the whole place!"_ said another voice. She growled and kept her cover as she heard activity above her.

"_This one's as good as dead, so dump 'em both,"_ said the first voice, followed by a grunt of effort.

There was a metallic clinking from above, and a few small rocks fell. Suddenly, something came tumbling down the steep, rocky face. She almost jumped as something rolled down into the grass and rocks at the base of the cliff. She could smell the scent of blood even heavier than before. Keeping under the cover of the bushes, with an illusion ready to go, she came forward to investigate.

She found two twisted bodies in a pile, both human. One looked to be a female, the other seemed to be male. Her eyes widened as she saw how thin they were, and the wounds that covered them. Bruises and slashes were seen almost everywhere their skin was exposed. The female wore what looked like a simple tan dress, tattered, dirty and bloody. The male wore a tan shirt, just as dirty, and gray pants with many tears in them. What shocked her the most was the thick, blackened iron collars they wore, a heavy chain linking the collars and smaller ones around their wrists.

She stood there, unable to believe what she was seeing. Her father had said humans could be very cruel to PokÃ©mon, but these were other humans. _Their own kind._ How could they do this to their own species? She couldn't understand it. As she came closer, she heard a soft sound. The sound of gentle breathing. She carefully came closer, watchful for any movement. Neither of the humans moved, but she could hear breathing. She stood over the two twisted forms where they laid. The male had landed on top of the female. The Zoroark wrinkled her nose at the smell of death. She saw a tiny hint of movement from the shoulders of the male human as they rose and fell. The male human was still alive.

"_Goddammit, did you dump them while they were still wearing collars?!"_ a voice angrily shouted. She looked up at the voice.

"_Uh, yeah?"_

"_You moron! Those damn things are expensive! You don't dump 'em until you take all the chains off! Go get 'em!"_ She began to panic as she heard movement. She was about to run, when she heard a soft sound, an exhale. She looked at the male human, who seemed barely able to move. She could hear the grumbling of the humans as they came to find the bodies and take the chains off. She looked back at the survivor. She looked around, up the cliff, then back. Her head told her to flee and leave the humans to their fate, but her heart said something different.

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The two men grumbled as they climbed down the steep rocks.

"Damn idiot. You never dump bodies with the chains on," muttered the first man, a tall man with a stocky build and a couple scars on his arms. The other was taller and thinner, with a kind of weasel look to him.

"What difference does it make? So we lose a few chains. Big deal." The shorter man glared at him.

"If somebody finds the bodies with collars on them, they'll know what's up, and then the cops'll be swarming around and asking questions. We get caught, and we'll never see the light of day again! That's _if_ we don't get the Death Penalty. Besides, they ain't cheap to have made, you know." The taller man grumbled his agreement as they neared the base of the short cliff. "Now, where did you dump 'em?" asked the shorter man. The taller man scratched his head.

"Don't know. I just kicked 'em over the side," admitted the taller man. The shorter man shook his head.

"Your fault we gotta find 'em, ya moron," he grumbled.

As they wound their way through the bushes, they stopped when they saw a group of Mightyena tearing at the bodies and growling. One really big one turned towards them and growled, mouth covered with blood. The two men gasped and scrambled to rush back the way they came as the group of hungry Mightyena fed on the bodies.

"Great! Now what'll we tell the boss?!" yelled the tall man as the scrambled to climb the steep face.

"Tell him the bodies are lunch! Now the chains don't matter too much!" replied the shorter man as he followed.

Zororark watched the two men leave as she let the illusion fall away. She gave a deep, relieved breath as she turned her attention back to the two humans.

It was very clear the female was dead. There was nothing that could be done for her. The male was still alive, though. She knelt next to him, looking him over, and seeing a human up close for the first time.

His short hair was a soft brown, like the bark of a tree. His skin was dirty, but looked pale underneath, a pinkish color. His eyes were closed, scrunched and looking pained. His breaths were labored and soft. The face was soft and rounded. From what she had seen of humans, it was younger humans who had such rounded faces. She guessed he was young, but not a child. She gently touched him, and was shocked how thin he was. She could feel his bones very easily. He seemed so small and vulnerable, fragile even. The chain attached to his collar clinked as she moved him from where he lay on top of the body below. His face twisted in discomfort, and she felt something herself. A pain, like her heart was being twisted.

"_This isn't right,"_ she thought. She gently laid him on the ground and looked at the cold, black iron that held him.

His neck was bound by a thick collar made of black iron. His neck was raw, red and bleeding around it. A thick iron chain linked his collar to that of the dead female human. His wrists were similarly bound and shackled, and just as raw and bloody. She grasped the chain attached to the collar and looked at it. It was very heavy. In such a weak state, there was no way this poor human could stand with such a weight. The chain that linked the manacles was not as heavy or thick, but it was strong. She moved the chain as she tried to look for a way to get the collar off. She noticed the human's face twist in pain as

the collar moved over his raw neck. She stopped, not wanting to cause him any more pain. She looked at the collar around the neck of the female for any solution. The collars seemed to be bound by some thick pin of iron, just as strong as the rest of the collar, if not more so.

"_Back to your cages! Move it!"_ yelled a voice, followed by that loud crack again. She looked up at the cliff, then quickly back to the human. She knelt next to him and gently touched his shoulder. She looked again at the chain. She had to find a way to separate him from the body of the other human. He was very light from starvation, but she doubted she could carry both bodies with their heavy iron chains. She pulled on the chain a bit, on the female's collar. She looked back at the human male, still unconscious. She put her foot on the chain, to it wouldn't pull on him.

She took a deep breath, extended her crimson claws to their fullest length, and swiped at the chain. The iron clinked, and a small chip appeared, but it mostly was unharmed. She growled as she swiped again, and again. Each time, a deeper nick appeared in the iron. She kept it up, swiping. Her Fury Swipes began to take a toll on the iron. She panted as she stood and pulled on the chain, holding it with her feet. She almost yelped when the chain snapped, the link broken open. She gave a sigh as she turned to the human.

He hadn't moved at all, nor had he reacted to the noise of her attacks. She carefully gathered him up into her arms, and was shocked how light he was. She gently brushed a strand of hair from his face with a crimson claw, looking at his features. She heard the crack again and glanced up at the cliff before disappearing into the bushes.

She moved through the woods swiftly, but carefully. The chain clinked as the end dangled from her grip slightly, but not enough to catch on anything. Her only thought was to get the poor human away from those others, those evil humans. Yes, she had decided they were evil. How else could she see it? She could hear other humans like him up there, bound like he was. That they would treat other humans, anyone like that. There was no other word for it but evil.

She finally came to the cave that was her den, safe and hidden by illusions and by the forest itself. She gently laid the human on the soft bed of grasses she used to sleep on. She looked at her paws, and could smell the blood on them. Some of it was dried, some wasn't. She looked at the human, seeing where the cuts in his shirt matched where there was a cut or welt underneath on his skin. She came close and gently touched her paw to his face, noting the bruise on his left temple.

She was at a loss what to do. She didn't know anything like medicine, or an Ability like Recover. She had seen humans before, but knew almost nothing about them. She closed her eyes, wishing her father was there. He would know what to do. Her eyes flew open as she remembered someone else in the forest who knew about humans. She checked the human to make sure he was as comfortable as she could make him, and the chain wasn't pulling on his neck. She gently covered with soft grasses to keep him warm. She then left to find Fearow.

The Fearow was resting in a tree at the moment, preening his feathers as he enjoyed the day. There were nice breezes blowing, and some good drafts for flying very high. Today, though, he just felt like sitting in his favorite tree and relaxing.

"_Fearow!"_ called a familiar voice. He sighed inwardly. At least, that had been his plan. He looked down as Zoroark came running into the small clearing around his favorite oak tree.

"Ah, Zororark. Haven't seen you in a while," he said, then noticed how out of breath she was, and her worried look. He flew down as his brows furrowed. "What's going on?" he asked. She quickly related what she had seen and the condition of the human. Fearow looked bothered, nay, he looked angered.

"Why? Why would humans do such a thing to their own species?" she asked, looking at the ground and frowning. Fearow sighed sadly, looking up at the sky.

"They call it 'slavery', my dear." She looked at him and the foreign, but dark word. He looked at her, eyes flashing with anger, but also some sadness. "Some humans treat others like they are tools, things to be used and thrown away. They not only do this with PokÃ©mon, but their own people, too." Zoroark was shocked. He watched the clouds, his eyes glazed, as if in distant memory. "They will sell these poor people, to be used for whatever the buyer sees fit. They are not free, and are owned, like property. They are treated cruelly, as you now know, and those who are too weak to work, are often either left to die, or killed outright." Zoroark froze, feeling ice chill her blood. She looked at her paws as she recalled their words:

"_This one's as good as dead, so dump 'em both . . ."_ She looked at Fearow.

"What can I do?" she asked. He sighed and looked at the tree.

"There's nothing you _can_ do," he replied. Her eyes widened, her pupils pinpricks.

"What do you mean?! There has to be a way!" she shot back. Fearow looked at her, his expression serious, but sad.

"He has been starved and beaten. The only way would be for other humans to help him." Her ears perked up at that.

Her mind flew to the human town. She looked down at the ground as her mind worked overtime. Fearow saw, and gave a soft sigh.

"I know what you're thinking, and your heart is in the right place, but just walking up to a human town, especially with an injured human is sure to cause trouble," he stated. She glared at him.

"Then what do you expect me to do?! I'm, not just going to let this poor human die! Nobody should be treated that way! Not PokÃ©mon, and surely not humans!" Fearow looked up at the sky as the clouds drifted. He looked at her again.

"You stay here; I'll be back," he said as he spread his wings and

took wing. She watched as he disappeared towards the north. She growled as she looked back down at the ground. She kicked a small rock that sailed off into the forest. Every second seemed like an eternity to her as she waited for Fearow to return. What was he looking for, anyway? If they didn't do something quick, the human would die. Her thoughts drifted back to when she picked him up. How he easily fit in her shadow, her arms. How small and vulnerable he was. How fragile he seemed, like a touch could break him. Her ears drooped the more she thought on the poor human. The sound of wings brought her back as she looked up. Fearow was coming in to land. His expression was grim. He leaned in front of her, feathers ruffled.

"It's worse than I thought. They must have close to a hundred humans there, in cages and chains." Zoroark stared at him, shocked, angered and disgusted. She looked up where he had come from. If she couldn't save the human, then she could avenge him. Fearow cleared his throat. "I understand your feelings, but the slavers have pretty good numbers, and I am pretty sure they have human weapons. Guns, they are called. Fighting them would be very unwise. At least, on your own." She looked at him as he closed one eye, giving her a rather sly look. "Right now, I think your first goal should be to save the human, don't you think?" She stared at him. "Rest assured, there will be Pokémons in the town, whom you can tell, and they can then tell the humans. We will need numbers if we are to save the others. But first, you need to get your human to a human healing house, a hospital." Zoroark stared at him in awe. She smiled. He really was the smartest Pokémon in the woods.

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Zoroark returned to the cave as quick as she could. She wasn't about to just stand by and let this human die without at least trying to save them. When she entered, she noticed the human had moved. He was curled up into a ball, arms and legs tucked in tight. As she came closer, she noticed he was shivering. She grew even more worried as she watched. She knelt next to him and gently touched his face. His eyes gently opened into slits, his eyes misty. She was surprised at the beautiful violet color to them. He rasped as he softly shifted. She gently caressed his hair, trying to assure him he was safe, and she would not harm him.

"Zoro, Zoroark. Zoro . . .," she said softly, telling him to hang on, and she would get him help. His eyes briefly focused on her, not seeming to truly see her. She gently touched the side of his face as his eyes fluttered shut once again. His breathing was raspy, but seemed a little stronger, but only a bit. She carefully gathered him up into her arms, careful and gentle with his delicate frame. Making sure the chain would not drag or snag, she left the cave.

Fearow was waiting. His eyes grew wide when he saw the human, and the state he was in. Zoroark came closer, and Fearow saw the extent of his injuries.

"I didn't know it was this bad," he said softly, looking at the human. He quickly looked at her. "You have to hurry. I'd say he has until tonight at the latest." She held his gaze. "I would carry you if I could, but . . ." She smiled softly as she looked at her cargo.

"Don't worry. I'll make it. The town isn't far." With that, she ran off as fast she she could, taking great care with her passenger.

"_Look for the human building with the red cross on it!"_ he called, hoping she made it in time, but he had his doubts.

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The sun was beginning to set, painting the skies fiery oranges, reds and yellows. It was a beautiful sunset.

Growlithe sat outside the watch house, watching the sunset as the sun seemed to set all creation on fire. He was suddenly aware of someone rapidly approaching. He turned, and could not have been more shocked to see a Zoroark, charging towards him as fast as it could go. He blinked and yelped before getting into a fighting stance.

"Growlithe!" he challenged, alerting his master, Officer Jenny. The human police officer came out and looked as the Zoroark approached quickly.

"What on earth?" she wondered as Growlithe growled. She frowned as she readied for trouble.

"Zoroark! Zoroark, Zoro!" she yelled, surprising them. She came running up, clearly out of breath.

"What is-" Jenny stopped when she saw what was in her arms. "Oh, Arceus!" She quickly ran and grabbed her radio. "This is Officer Jenny! Quick, I need an ambulance! Code One!" She looked up at the Zoroark quickly talked with Growlithe, whose eyes were huge. He looked at Jenny and rapidly barked, clearly distressed, but also seeming angry. She blinked, wondering what the Zoroark had told him. "I radioed for an ambulance. It will be here soon," she assured. Zoroark looked at the young man in its arms, and shook its head.

"Zoro, Zoro. Zoroark!" Growlithe barked at it, then Jenny. Before she could ask, they both ran off.

"Hey! Wait!" She ran to catch up with them.

Zoroark ran as fast she as could, following the directions of the Growlithe. Any other time, she might be nervous, or awed to be in a human town, but right now, she was focused on finding the hospital.

"Growlithe!" said the Growlithe, leading her on the most direct route to the hospital. She glanced down at the human in her arms.

"Please hold on. We're almost there," she soothed in her own language.

"_Growl!"_ said the Growlithe. She looked up at the three-story-tall building they dashed for. She doubled her efforts as she dashed for the door, surprising and even scaring a few people. She was surprised that the doors opened by themselves. The surprised humans looked up as she and Growlithe dashed in.

"Zoroark!" she yelled. The startled humans jumped.

"What in the world is going on here?!" asked a nurse as she came forward.

"Emergency!" Officer Jenny yelled as she finally caught up with them. "We have a medical emergency here! Get the Doctor here, right now!" she commanded. Several people rushed to do as the Officer commanded, while one nurse came forward and saw, with horror, what was held in the Zoroark's arms.

"Get me a blanket, stat!" she yelled back.

Zoroark gently caressed his hair, trying to soothe him and hoping he would cling to life long enough for them to help.

"Zoro. Zoro. Zoroark," she soothed softly. Jenny watched in a mixture of confusion and awe. A team of nurses came with a stretcher, the Doctor with them. He looked serious as he came up and looked at the young man held in Zoroark's arms.

"Boy, this is bad," said the Doctor. He looked up at her, carefully taking the young man from her arms, the chains clinking as he gently laid him down on the stretcher. He shined a light in his eyes, and checked his heartbeat with a stethoscope. "Not a moment too soon. Let's get an IV in him and a blanket. Come on!" he ordered. He was surprised when Zoroark put her paw on his shoulder.

"Zoro. Zoro, Zoroark," she said firmly, motioning from her, to the young man on the stretcher. The Doctor looked about to protest when Jenny interjected.

"Let her come. She won't get in the way," said the Officer, giving the Zoroark a meaningful look. Zoroark nodded her head. The Doctor looked back at Zoroark, then nodded. She followed as they went further into the hospital.

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"Okay, let's get this poor fellow some fluids," said the Doctor as they set to work. Several nurses, men and women, work working with the Doctor, one taking a sample of blood, another putting a needle into the young man's arm to give him the fluids he needed. The Doctor gave a heavy sigh as he looked at the heavy chains and collar the young man wore. "Get me a bolt-cutter and get these chains off," said the Doctor.

Zoroark sat in a chair and watched, hoping it wasn't too late. She watched as the Doctor and his team did what they could to save his life. It was hard for her to just sit back and watch. She wanted to help! She looked down at the floor, thinking on what she had seen, what Fearow had said. She closed her eyes, remembering the sound she heard, that thundering crack.

"Here's the cutters," said one of the male nurses. Zoroark looked up as the man came in with a strange human thing. It looked like a long V-shape, the ends pained red and black. The Doctor nodded, grasped the ends and placed the chain in the jaws and began to press the ends together. He grunted with effort, trying to cut through the tough

chain.

"Damn, this chain is tough," he muttered as he tried to cut it.

"Zoroark," she said softly, getting up and pointing to herself, then the cutter. The Doctor nodded, letting her grasp the handles. She carefully squeezed them together, the cutter cutting through the link of the chain with a snap. The Doctor motioned to the other side of the link, and she repeated it. The Doctor let the heavy chain drop to the floor with a loud thunk. The Doctor took a more careful look at the collar, wincing slightly.

"Nurse, get me some Xylocaine," asked the Doctor.

"Zoroark?" she asked, not knowing what the strange word meant. The Doctor seemed to know she was confused.

"Xylocaine will numb his neck and wrists, so he won't feel when we move these things and take them off." Zoroark gave a soft smile and nodded, glad he wouldn't hurt.

"Here, Doctor," said the nurse as she handed him a small cup of a smelly gel. He took a blob of it and gently smeared it on the young man's neck and wrists. He handed back the cup and looked at Zoroark. He gently turned the collar, exposing the pin that locked it around his neck. She noticed how some blood flowed as it moved. The Doctor carefully placed the open jaws of the cutter over the pin. He nodded to Zoroark, who pushed the cutter handles together, hard. With a loud click, the jaws snapped together, and the flat end of the pin fell to the floor with a clunk, showing how heavy it really was. The Doctor carefully pulled the pin out of the collar and set it on a tray. He grasped the collar and carefully opened it. There was a sick, wet sound and more blood flowed.

"Sweet Arceus," said a nurse as they took in the horrible sight.

The collar had rubbed away the skin of the young man's neck so badly, the muscles and tendons underneath were completely exposed. The larynx was fully visible. The Doctor's gaze hardened as he dropped the collar on the floor with a clang.

Zoroark was in a state of horrified shock at the state of the human, wondering how he was even still alive. It looked like someone had sliced his neck open. She almost dropped the cutters. The Doctor gently took them, motioning for her to take a seat.

"Thank you for your help," he said as she numbly sat. "It looks bad, but I think he'll be okay. I'm more worried about keeping him warm and getting some food into him," said the Doctor as they set to cleaning the wounds and cutting off the manacles. She looked at the floor. She was disgusted, angry, sad, confused, so many emotions swirled in her mind. "Looks like he's coming around," said the Doctor. Zoroark looked up at that, quickly moving to stand next to the stretcher.

The young man's eyes fluttered gently. "Just relax, young man. You're safe. You're in a hospital," said the Doctor as the young man shivered under the heated blanket that covered him. The Doctor moved back as Zoroark stood over him. "If it hadn't been for your friend

here, you'd be dead right now." Zoroark gently caressed his hair as his eyes focused, and this time, they truly saw her.

"Zoroark, Zor," she said softly, gently holding his hand, assuring him he was safe. He stared at her for a moment, then gently squeezed her hand. She smiled softly, stroking his hair, tears burning in her eyes.

"Aw, that's sweet," said the female nurse. The Doctor smiled softly as Zoroark let him in to take care of her friend.

"You just relax and get some sleep. You're in good hands," the Doctor assured.

Zoroark was filled with warmth and hope. She let a few tears stream down her muzzle.

"How is he?" asked a familiar female voice. Zoroark looked up as Officer Jenny checked in. The Doctor didn't look up from where he was bandaging the young man's throat.

"He's still in bad shape, but I think he'll live." Jenny nodded, looking at the chains, manacles and collar, a look of complete and utter disgust on her face. "I had heard slavery was coming back in some places, but I never thought I would see it myself," said the Doctor.

"Neither did I," said Jenny, who then looked at Zoroark. Jenny smiled sadly as she approached. "I understand your rush to get him here. You were very kind to help him." Zoroark looked at the young man who was now once more unconscious. Jenny looked at him, amazed he was alive. She then looked back at Zoroark. "I need to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind." Zoroark looked at her. "Was he alone?" Jenny asked. Zoroark shook her head.

"Zoro, Zoroark. Zoro Zoro. Ro, Zoroark," said Zoroark, making motions with her arms, trying to convey there were more. Jenny's eyes widened. Zoroark pointed in the directions of the mountains. "There's more?" Zoroark nodded firmly. Jenny scowled at this, her eyes drifting to the chains and shackles. There was still blood and bits of skin on them. She was visibly shaking. Jenny calmed herself, breathing out. "It's too late to do anything now. But first thing tomorrow, we're going after those that did this!" Jenny pumped her fist for emphasis. Zoroark nodded her agreement.

"Zoroark!" she declared, pounding a fist on her chest. Jenny smiled as best she could.

"Thanks. We'll need your help to find them." Zoroark nodded again. Jenny turned to where one of the nurses had placed the collar, chains and shackles in plastic bags for evidence. Jenny took them somberly, obviously feeling how heavy they were, and disgusted to even hold the vile things. She never would have thought simple iron could be so evil. She looked up at Zoroark, who looked at her friend sadly. Jenny looked at the Doctor. "Dr. Nells, is it okay if-?" Jenny began, only for him to nod.

"Sure she can stay the night. We just need to stabilize him," he replied. Zoroark blinked, surprised, but thankful. Jenny smiled at this. She looked at Zoroark.

"That's good. I'll be by tomorrow to check on him, and pick you up. The other slaves will need your help." With that, Jenny left. Zoroark watched her go, then turning her attention back to the young man clinging to life on the stretcher before her.

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Later that night, Zoroark sat next to the bed the former slave was now resting in. He seemed comfortable. A heart monitor beeped steadily next to his bed, and an IV delivered vital fluids and medicines. She gently touched his soft hair, which had been cleaned up some.

"Zoro. Zoro," she said softly, hoping his rest be peaceful. She was grateful to Dr. Nells and his staff. They had provided her a small cot to sleep on, and said she was free to visit any time she liked to check on him. Her cot was right next to his bed. If he needed anything, she was right there. His breathing was far less raspy, and it seemed much easier for him to breathe. She continued to gently stroke his hair, watching him as he slept.

Her mind began to turn to those that had done this, and what Officer Jenny would do tomorrow. What Zoroark would do. Surely, she wasn't going to just show the way, then stand back and let Jenny and any help deal with those evil humans. She gave a soft growl as she thought about grabbing those two human males she saw, and throttling them. She would love to see them put into chains, like they did to this poor human, and the others. She heard him softly cough, bringing her out of her thoughts. A soft smile replaced her angry scowl. She let that go for now. She would never get any sleep if she focused on them and was angry. She needed as much strength and energy as she could get, as she had spent a good deal getting him there. A fight was more than likely tomorrow, and if that was the case, she wanted to be fresh.

She didn't like fighting really, but those who pushed her found out quick she was not a pushover, nor of a low level. She returned her focus to the human. She gently brushed a strand of hair from his face, seemingly fascinated by him. Indeed, she was. He was the first human she had ever seen close. She wasn't sure if they had really "met" yet, but she hoped he would wake soon, so she could get to know him, and show him he was free.

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She awoke to one of the nurses softly knocking on the door. Zoroark looked up, her ears twitching.

"Officer Jenny is here." Zoroark nodded and stood up. The nurse smiled as best she could, given what was going on. "Don't worry. We'll take good care of him." Zoroark looked at her, and gave a soft nod before she walked past.

Outside, Jenny was waiting, along with a whole team of police officers. They all wore serious expressions.

"All right, now it's time to get the rest of them out of there!" said Jenny. Growlthe yipped beside her, agreeing. Jenny turned back to her officers. "All right, men! We're going in to catch those

criminals and free those poor people! Let's get to it!"

_"

Yes, Ma'am!" they chorused at once. Jenny threw a Pokéball. A Pidgeot emerged, calling out his cry to the dawn. Jenny got on and motioned for Zoroark to do the same.

XXX

A short time later, Jenny and her team were flying over the Stahl Mountains. Zoroark couldn't help staring in awe at seeing the world from so high. She never would have imagined how small it all looked. Riding behind Jenny on Pidgeot, she stared in wonder at it all, her home from so high up.

"Which way now?" Jenny asked. Zoroark looked around for landmarks, and recognized the sandy cliffs where she had found the poor humans. Jenny nodded.

"All right, follow me!" she shouted as the others followed her.

"Hey, what's that?!" called on of the officers.

Something was flying towards them, fast. Zoroark looked, and was surprised when she recognized Fearow.

"Zoroark!" she called, waving. They all watched as the Fearow flew up beside Jenny and Zoroark.

"_Ah, I see you got help,"_ said Fearow in his own language. Zoroark nodded. "_The human?"_ Zoroark yipped and gave a thumbs up. He looked relieved. "_That's good to hear. The slave-keepers are getting ready to leave. We have been giving them a few headaches for now, little things like stealing food and such, but we wanted to wait until we knew, or they started to move."_ Zoroark's ears perked up at this.

"_'We'?"_ she echoed. Fearow chuckled darkly.

"_I called in a few favors,"_ was all he said before leading the way. Zoroark grinned as she stood up and threw her paw forward.

"_Charge!"_ she shouted in her own tongue. Jenny seemed to know what she was saying, and grinned.

"Full speed ahead!" she shouted as they all dove.

As they neared the small plateau where the slavers were camped, the sounds of fighting and yelling could be heard.

"Damn animals!" a man yelled as the camp was literally swarmed by Pokémon. Zoroark was in awe she saw hundreds of Pokémon pouring in to aid the humans held there. Three sent flying by an angry Ursaring, and another two were quickly grabbed and their heads bashed together by the same Ursaring as it roared. An angry Ponyta knocked a large man down and trampled him into submission. Pidgey and Spearow flocked in huge masses, diving and scratching and causing dust storms

with Gust and their Sand attacks. A Bayleef grabbed three more men and squeezed them with its vines until they squealed. One of the slavers had managed to get hold of a whip they used on the slaves, twirling it and cracking it, sending Pok  mon scattering at the loud sound. Zoroark was surprised to finally learn what had made that sound, and she was angered when she saw the whip lash out and strike a poor Chikorita, leaving a cut behind. Zoroark growled angrily.

"Stop!" Jenny yelled as they swooped in, making the men look up. "This is the police! You're all under arrest!" Zoroark jumped off when they were close to the ground and charged the man with the whip.

"_You monster!_" she screamed as she lunged. The man cracked the whip, throwing it over his shoulder expertly. She dodged, and with a tilt of the wrist, the bullwhip followed. She just barely ducked it, amazed at how flexible the attack was. The human snapped his wrist, and the whip seemed to come alive, like a writhing Onix. She ducked and wove as the whip snapped. It was not only hard to dodge, but made it so she couldn't get near. She growled as she thought of this vile man using the whip on those poor people. She reached up and grabbed the whip in her claws, her eyes glowing as she yanked, hard, bringing the shocked man towards her as she reared back, claws extended. She roared as she let him have a taste of her Night Slash, sending him across the plateau to crash against some rocks. She turned back as Jenny and the police unleashed their Pok  mon on the slavers.

One of the crooks managed to get to their supplies, and hefted up a shotgun as he chambered a shell by pulling the pump.

"Take this, cops!" he yelled, just as Fearow dove on him and began pecking him. The man dropped the gun and screamed as Fearow attacked, finally sweeping the man off his feet with a mighty beat of his wings.

The fight was fierce, but over quickly. Quite thankfully, nobody was killed, human or Pok  mon. Jenny and the police were able to arrest and handcuff the slimy crooks who were behind it. Then, they found the slaves.

Men and women, chained, in cages and trucks. Fearow had been right, there was a good eighty slaves or so, but there was some evidence to support them having more. When Zoroark saw the man who was the ringleader, she almost lost it.

She growled as she glared at the bald, tattooed man who didn't seem to care at all the suffering and the pain he had caused. She stormed up to him, angrily pointing at him.

"Zoro! Zoroark! Zoro, Zoro, Zoro! Zoroark!" she yelled at the top of her lungs, so mad she could hardly see straight. She couldn't fathom how he could sit there in handcuffs and be unmoved when the police were covering up the bodies of slaves that he had killed! Jenny seemed just as angry at this man as she watched him with a glare, Growlithe glaring and growling at him as well. The man looked at Zoroark, then back to Jenny.

"Wanna keep your dog muzzled? It's getting drool on me." Zoroark's eyes bulged at that. She trembled with fury and she stalked forward,

ready to strangle this man. Jenny stopped her.

"Don't worry. He won't get out of this. I can guarantee you he'll be facing at the very least life in prison, if not the Death Penalty." Jenny looked at the man, knowing how Zoroark was feeling, and, Arceus help her, if she could, she would break this man's arms and legs and leave him out in the wild. Zoroark wasn't satisfied with that at all. That was when an idea came to her, and she grinned evilly.

"Hey, what're you doing?" the man asked as Zoroark clasped an iron slave collar around his neck and slid the pin in, the heavy chain hanging off him. Jenny just crossed her arms and smiled thinly.

"Making sure you stay put. You're a flight risk," she stated flatly. The man glared at Zoroark, who gave a toothy grin, that said as elegantly as plain English: _"Payback's a Bitch."_

Jenny and the officers then turned their attention to the slaves, and getting them medical aid. She radioed back to make sure the hospital was ready for the nearly hundred patients it was about to receive.

Zoroark watched as Jenny and the police helped the slaves, giving what aid they could on the spot. She looked at Fearow, who sat perched on a rock.

"Thank you, Fearow. You helped a lot. Everyone did," said Zoroark as the Pokémon helped the police.

"I may be wary of humans, but I don't wish them harm," he stated.

"The hospital is ready when they get there. HQ is sending a Rescue Squad right now," said Jenny as she approached. Zoroark smiled softly and nodded. Jenny smiled wider. "And . . . your friend is awake."

XXX

She was nervous as she walked down the hall to the room where the human was staying. She didn't know why she was nervous, but she was, all the same. The nurse was waiting, a soft smile on her face as she opened the door for her.

He was actually awake. He was sitting up, the back of the bed raised. She stopped as she entered the room, just standing and looking at him, almost not believing he was not only alive, but awake. When she looked at his face, something inside her chest felt warm, fuzzy and tight. When she looked at those eyes, she froze for some reason. They were so deep, the color so dark, yet so bright at the same time. The way they shined, as if stars wandered in an endless abyss of wonder behind them.

They seemed frozen for the longest time. At last, she moved forward, slowly and carefully, her eyes carefully taking in every detail. She stopped next to the bed. She knelt down to be at his eye level, and not tower over him. His violet eyes followed her every move. Her ears twitched softly. She gently raised a paw, and saw him tense. She moved slowly and carefully, placing her paw barely an inch from his

fingers.

"Zoro," she said softly, greeting him for what seemed like the first time. It was, as a matter of fact. He had not been lucid the few times he briefly opened his eyes. This was truly their first meeting. As Pokémon and human, and people. She smiled softly, gently tilting her head. "Zoroark." He glanced down at her paws near his hands, then back up at her sapphire eyes that seemed to shimmer with wonder. Almost without realizing it, his hand slid onto her paw. She smiled softly as she gave his hand a gentle squeeze. "Zoro." She placed her other paw over his hand, gently as she could. She saw a reddish tinge begin to appear on his pale cheeks that had been cleaned of dirt, and now were almost white. His eyes seemed to water as a soft, gentle and timid smile tugged at his lips. It was the single most beautiful thing she had ever seen in all her life.

XXX

The hospital was very busy as everyone rushed to help the former slaves who had been freed. Many were in critical condition, and a few had died on the way there. News was quickly spreading of what had happened, and help was already starting to pour in. The local Pokémon center was almost inundated with offers from trainers willing to lend their Pokémon to help, and transfers were taking place at a dizzying speed. Poor Nurse Joy was working overtime to keep up. Help was coming from places as far away as Unova, Sevra and even Kanto.

Zoroark, though, was content to stay with her friend. Dr. Nells and his staff knew what they were doing in helping the other slaves. She wanted to stay close and make sure he was all right. Every day, the nurses would change his bandages, clean the wounds and give him more antibiotics to fight the infections in the wounds. Zoroark never left his side, and was always there to hold his hand. Cleaning the wounds was not pleasant, and as much as the sight of his exposed larynx unsettled her, seeing how his eyes shined when she stayed meant all the world.

It had been a few days after the slaves were freed. There were almost more Pokémon in the town now than people. Dr. Nells now had nearly 300 Pokémon on call to help his staff, who would have been overwhelmed otherwise.

Currently, Dr. Nells was checking his throat, Zoroark sitting right by his side.

"Hmm," said Dr. Nells as he looked at his throat without the bandage on. "Not as red, or as swollen. That's good. It seems to be healing. Only minor infection. Looking pretty good, all things considered," said Dr. Nells as he stood and switched off the small flashlight. Zoroark sat next to his bed, hand gently held in hers. She gave a soft smile, glad to hear her friend was healing.

As the Doctor replaced his flashlight, he heard a curious sound. It was a soft, rasping sound. He looked up, and the young man bore a look of concentration and pain, wincing as he tried to speak. "Don't talk. Your throat is damaged. Here," said Dr. Nells as he pulled out a notepad and a pencil from his coat. Zoroark tilted her head as he took the pad and began to write. He showed it to Dr. Nells:

"**Sister?"** Dr. Nells looked at the pad, his face unreadable. He looked at the young man.

"I don't know. We're still sorting out everything-" The young man scribbled something quickly, showing him the new note:

"**Sister chained to me. What happen?"** Dr. Nells looked to Zoroark.

"His sister was chained to him. What happened?" he asked her. Zoroark felt like she had been tackled in the gut. Her ears drooped, and her eyes dropped to the floor. She looked up at Dr. Nells, and her friend. For a long moment, nobody said anything, or even moved. She saw the look in her friend's eyes, saw the sadness, but something she couldn't place. He wrote something new:

"**Sister free."** Zoroark felt tears sting her eyes at that. She was surprised when she felt soft fingers brush her tears away. "**Not your fault. Sister is free, no pain. Thank you."** At the same time, her heart felt heavy, but also lifted.

There truly had been nothing she could have done for his sister. She was dead before Zoroark even got there. He also was right that she was free from pain, torment and fear. She was with Arceus, now.

Dr. Nells smiled softly at this.

"Here, let's change your bandages," said Dr. Nells, who set to work changing the young man's bandages. "By the way, do you have a name?" The young man scribbled again, Zoroark watching, her ears perked up, curious to learn her friend's name.

"**Simon."** Dr. Nells smiled as he applied the new bandage of Caterpie silk to Simon's neck.

"Well, Simon, I think you and the others are going to be okay." Dr. Nells smiled at Zoroark. "Friends always help," he said with a wink. Zoroark couldn't help a smile, and squeezed Simon's hand.

XXX

Zoroark walked through the small town almost in a daze. It was so much to take in, all of it. She never could have fathomed the cruelty humans were capable of, but, at the same time, she was amazed at the kindness and caring they had shown.

Her ears perked up at the sound of wings. She looked up as Fearow flew in and landed on a rock by the side of the road.

"Hey, Fearow," she greeted. He gave a nod of his head.

"Overwhelming, isn't it?" he asked. She sighed and nodded, her red and black mane softly moving in the evening breeze. Fearow preened his feathers a little before continuing. "They came from the Northeast. The human police were saying a town had been attacked in that direction." Zoroark looked at him. "From what they have heard from the police around that area, the whole town was burned down, but

only a few people were killed. I think we know where they went," he finished, looking over at the police who were gathered in front of a building. One of them raised a bugle, and began to play a soft, sad melody.

"What are they doing?" Zoroark asked. Fearow sighed.

"It is called 'Taps', it is a tune of sadness and mourning, but also respect." She looked at him, seeing his focus on the humans.

The soft tune of the police playing Taps for the dead echoed through the mountains, proclaiming the tragedy for all within hearing range. People and Pok  mon alike gathered. Many were in tears, some were solemn, none were unmoved. Zoroark and Fearow were silent for a long while, just watching as the sun set, and the people and Pok  mon of the town showed their respect.

"The one who was chained to him . . . was his sister," she said sadly. Fearow glanced at her.

"How sad. But you must not blame yourself. There is nothing else that could have been done. You gave help as quick as you could, and you barely saved his life as it was." She felt her ears droop. She knew he was right, but that made it no easier. "I think you should go be with your human friend. He is still scared and alone, and now that he knows his sister has died, he will feel even more isolated." She looked at Fearow, who still watched the humans with focused eyes.

"His name is Simon," she stated. He looked up at her. His eyes seemed misty, as if in deep memory.

"Is it, now?" His voice seemed as if he was pulled out of some dream, half-remembered. Fearow seemed, at the same time, amused, and saddened. He looked back at the gathered humans and Pok  mon as they said prayers for the dead.

XXX

Night had fallen when Zoroark returned to the hospital. The staff were no longer rushing about, but they still were tense. Many of the former slaves were still in critical condition. Every now and then, she would hear the staff rushing to a room as one of the patients began to "crash" as they said. Some still died, despite the efforts of the nurses and Dr. Nells, but, at the very least, they died warm, cared-for and without fear or pain.

When she entered Simon's room, he was already asleep. She gave a soft sigh as she closed the door. He was curled into a small ball in the bed. She frowned as she came closer. She noticed the tracks of tears on his face. It tore at her heart. She couldn't imagine how he must feel.

No. She did understand. She had been very sad when her father died. She noticed him shiver ever so slightly.

Dr. Nells had said that, due to his being close to starvation, his body was having a hard time keeping warm. While the room was warm, Simon still shivered. An idea came to her. Carefully, she crawled into the bed, snuggling close to him. Her strong arms wrapped around

his thin waist, paws gently held against his chest. Her red mane draped over him, acting like a blanket. She stroked his hair softly. She felt him tense for a moment, before relaxing as she spooned with him. She smiled softly, humming contently.

"Don't be afraid, Simon. I'm here. I'll keep you warm and safe," she softly promised in her own language. Her larger frame allowed her to quite easily cover his entire body, wrapping him up in her fur and the blankets.

More than anything, Simon needed a friend. Someone to hold his hand, and to hold him when he cried. In this sensitive and vulnerable time was when he needed someone who cared the most. She had wished she had someone like that when her father died.

XXX

A few days later, Zoroark sat with Simon as one of the nurses changed his bandages.

Zoroark hated those times, as the bandages had to be changed every day, and each time, they pulled some flesh off with them. They had to, she was told, as it pulled off dead tissue, that would at the very least cause infections, if not something even worse. She didn't hate it because it was disgusting, or because it inconvenienced her; she hated it because it was painful for Simon.

She held his hand as the nurse changed the bandages, his body trembling and a tear streaming down his face. The nurse smiled as best she could, trying to cause as little pain as possible.

"Zoro. Zoro," she comforted as she stroked Simon's hand. The nurse smiled gratefully at the Zoroark as she finished changing the bandage on his neck.

A large Charizard stood to the side, holding a tray of fresh bandages and tools for the nurse. The Charizard gave a soft growl, friendly and kind in tone. It was one of the many Pokémon that had been transferred to help, and was diligent with helping the poor people, the victims of cruelty at the hands of their own kind.

"There. All done," said the nurse as she replaced the tools. The Charizard growled softly, smiling warmly as it patted Simon on the head gently.

"__I'll bring you something to eat,"_ said the Charizard in her own language. Zoroark smiled and nodded as they left. Zoroark sat next to Simon, gently stroking his hands and comforting him. He smiled weakly at her, a tear still running.

"Zoro," she said softly as she reached up and gently brushed the tear away, her blue eyes shining with kindness. She brushed a strand of brown hair from his eyes, her other paw gently holding his hand. Even though Simon was unable to speak, and Zoroark unable to speak a human language, they understood each other on a fundamental level.

The door of the room opened, and the Charizard returned, a bowl of berries in her claws. She smiled as she handed it to Zoroark, before turning and shutting the door. Zoroark smiled as she picked out a berry, and offered it. Simon reached out, but was surprised when she

smiled and moved it closer to his lips. He blinked in surprise before opening his mouth. She smiled further and popped the sweet berry into his mouth. "Zoro," she softly murmured as she ate a berry herself, then offering another to Simon, who couldn't help a smile as she fed him.

Things continued like this for the next few weeks, Zoroark caring for Simon and keeping him company as he slowly recovered, almost never leaving his side. The other human slaves were also healing and recovering, but few were as bad as Simon was. The few that had been worse had passed away. Every time Zoroark heard the hospital PA call out "Code Blue", she knew another human was leaving the torment of the mortal coil to embrace Arceus. While it saddened her, it also gave her some relief that they were free from suffering. Nobody deserved to suffer like that.

One morning, Zoroark awoke to a soft sound. She blinked as she came back to consciousness, and focused her ears on the sound. She turned over in her cot, and stopped when she saw Simon.

He was awake and sitting up, his face covered with his hands as his shoulders shook with soft, almost silent sobs. She was up in a heartbeat. "Zoro?" she asked softly as she sat behind him, her arm gently sliding around his shaking shoulders. He sniffed as he looked up at her, eyes red and bloodshot from the stinging tears. She felt like someone had stabbed her in the chest. Without a word, she slid her arms around him and pulled him against her, her paw gently and tenderly stroking his hair.

Even though Simon's physical wounds were healing, his mental and spiritual ones were still raw. It was silly to ask what was bothering him. After what he had been through, she didn't blame him at all for his tears. She let her fur blot his tears and she held him close, softly whispering to him, telling him he was safe, and it was okay. Before she knew it, he was in her lap as she softly rocked him back and forth, promising she was there and would not leave him alone. Even if he could not understand her words, he understood her intent, and clung to her as if his very soul depended on it. She held him in a gentle embrace until he fell asleep once more. She carefully laid him back down to sleep.

XXX

Zoroark walked in the small garden outside the hospital as the sun's first rays of dawn softly caressed the sleepy world. Part of her acknowledged how beautiful it was, but mostly, her mind was elsewhere, focused on her poor friend.

Simon had been through so much, seen such horrors that she could hardly imagine. He had been starved, beaten, watched people die, lost his family. It was little wonder he was such an emotional wreck. Her head tilted back as she had remembered hearing him whimper softly in his sleep. She knew he had nightmares, but felt powerless to do anything, save comfort his wounded body. Her eyes settled on a fluffy clouded, painted rosy pinks by the dawn. Her ears drooped and her brow furrowed as she wondered if there was any hope that his soul could heal.

"How is your friend?" asked a soft voice. She looked at the Grovyle, who was tending some flowers, carefully positioning them to catch as

much of the coming sunlight as they could.

"His body is healing, but his mind . . ." she trailed off. The Grovyle kept her attention on the flowers, but was listening intently.

"It's not surprising, given what he went through. I can't even imagine the torment," said the Grovyle as she carefully caressed a rose. Zoroark sighed heavily, feeling helpless. Grovyle looked at Zoroark out of the corner of her eye, then back to the rose. "Some humans are like flowers," began Grovyle, catching Zoroark's attention. Grovyle gently caressed the rose, as if she was touching a lover, the touch soft, gentle and tender. "Some have closed themselves off, for fear of pain. It's not at all their fault, and we must not blame them."

She ran her clawed hands down the stem of the rose, over the sharp thorns. "Some erect thorns, to keep others away. Some seal themselves up, and refuse to show their beauty, for fear of being hurt, or the worry that someone will only notice their beauty for a scant moment, then leave them to wither." As Grovyle touched the delicate rose, to Zoroark's amazement, the flower began to open. The beautiful flower opened to both the rays of the sun, and Grovyle's gentle, loving touch.

The rose was not bright red, but a soft, pale pink. The petals were delicate and veined, but beautiful, nevertheless. Grovyle smiled as the flower opened. "Sometimes, what it really takes is a gentle hand, and loving kindness for a flower to bloom into something spectacular and breathtaking." Grovyle looked up at her, eyes shining with meaning. Zoroark smiled and nodded her agreement.

Grovyle smiled as she turned and picked something up. She turned back, and held out a small rose in a pot, the small, pink bloom shimmering with morning dew on its delicate petals. "This is for your friend. When humans see and smell flowers, it comforts them. The scent of earth reminds them of the world that is their home." Zoroark took the small rose plant, noticing how the thorns had been carefully removed. Or, had there ever been any thorns on it to begin with? She looked at Grovyle, who smiled and gave a shooing motion with her claws. Zoroark smiled and inhaled the lovely scent.

When she returned, Simon was already up, looking at the sunlight streaming through the closed drapes of the window. He looked to her, and was surprised at the rose plant she carried carefully.

"Zoroark, Zor," she said softly, offering the plant. He stared at her for a few moments, carefully taking the plant from her. He gently touched the rose, a soft smile tugging at his lips as he smelled the lovely scent. He swallowed hard, then looked up at her, eyes shining with tears. She smiled and gently held his hand. "Zoro," she said softly.

XXX

A little later that day, they were surprised when Officer Jenny came by. She smiled and gave a polite wave as she entered the room.

"Hi, there. Hope you're feeling better," she said softly as Zoroark sat next to him. Simon was able to smile and nod. Officer Jenny

looked relieved. "Glad to hear that." She took a seat on a stool next to them, bringing out a pad of paper. "You'll be happy to know that monster who had you all chained is being tried, and his cronies. I'll eat my hat if they get off with all the evidence against them." Jenny gave an amused smile and winked at them. "Not to mention, they know the minute they set foot outside that court, they'll be facing an angry mob. They'd be safer in prison on Death Row than outside." Zoroark gave a soft growl and nodded her head in agreement, gently stroking Simon's hand. Jenny couldn't help feeling warm inside at how much this Zoroark had helped him, and still was.

Her smile slipped, somewhat as she looked down at her notepad. "We're seeing to it that those who . . . didn't make it, are buried with respect." Jenny looked at Simon, who looked sad. Zoroark gently stroked his hair. Jenny smiled sadly. "I know one of them was your sister. If you don't mind, we'd like to know her name, so we can have it engraved on her grave marker." She offered Simon the notepad. He stared at it for a moment, not moving. He slowly took it, and wrote on it, long and slow. He handed it back without looking at Jenny, his gaze instead on the bed. The Officer took the pad and read what he had wrote:

****Helen Morris, age 17.**** Jenny looked at Simon, who was fighting tears, Zoroark gently stroking his hair and wiping his tears away.

"Don't worry, Simon. We'll make sure she's treated well," Jenny assured. Simon sniffed, then reached for a pad of paper and pencil, writing something, then offering it to Jenny.

*****What will happen to us?***** Jenny sighed heavily.

Their village had been burned down. There was no home to go back to. Word had already spread around the world, and help was coming quick, but it still was up to the Kamera Government, which was not at all what anyone would call strong, or stable. With all the wars and proxy-wars breaking out all over their small country, all the violence and bloodshed, they would have a hard time with this. So many resources were being taken up with fighting to keep the country together, and fighting the various factions, they could hardly spare any, even for something as important as this.

"Don't you worry. With everybody helping, it will be all right." Jenny hoped it would be so. She watched as Zoroark gently held Simon, stroking his hair and offering soft, gentle words in her own language to comfort him. Jenny smiled as best she could before leaving.

Zoroark just held Simon against her for the longest time, softly stroking his hair. As she comforted him, she thought on what Officer Jenny had said. Simon, and all the other poor humans, no longer had homes to go back to. No shelters from storms and cold. She sighed softly as she rocked Simon gently against her, feeling him ease into slumber. She looked down at him, a gentle smile gracing her lips. The thought occurred to her, when Simon was better, to have him live with her in her den. Her ears drooped and she sighed. That would be a rough life for a human, but what alternative was there? She was not about to let him be homeless. As she gently tucked him under the covers, she thought on every possibility she could. If it came down to it, and there was no other choice, she would have him live with

her. Leaving him to his fate was just not an option.

As she gazed at him, slumbering, her features softened. He looked so peaceful, now. She placed a soft, gentle kiss on his forehead.

"Zoro," she whispered softly before laying down on her cot and going to sleep.

XXX

Zoroark smiled and hummed to herself as she watered the pretty pink rose that sat in the windowsill. Although small, the rose seemed to give a comforting energy with its pretty color and soft smell. She set the glass aside and touched the rose with her claws. It was such a lovely flower. Her ears twitched as she heard Simon stir. She turned and smiled as he woke up. She came over as he sat up.

"Zoroark," she greeted as she sat on the bed next to him. He looked at her and smiled. He held out his hand, which she gladly took. She placed her other paw over his hand, gently holding it. Her eyes closed. It was then that she heard a sound she never heard before. It was a soft, raspy sound, but not the choked attempt at speech she heard from him before.

"_Z-Zhora,"_ Her eyes snapped open, ears perked. She stared at him, unbelieving. It was soft and rasped, but he had spoken.

"Zoro?" she asked tentatively. His eyes locked on hers.

"Zhora?" She felt her heart skip a beat. It wasn't her language; he thought that was her name.

He had given her a name.

He repeated the name. She felt tears as she nodded, pointing to herself. "Zhora," he repeated. She slid her arms around him and pulled him close, rocking back and forth as the tears flowed.

"Zoro, Zoroark. Zoro." She was so moved, she didn't know what to do. She now had a name. She was Zhora.

XXX

Zhora felt so happy as she walked among the grass in the soft sunlight. It might seem small, but many PokÃ©mon aspired to have a Trainer, someday. To have an individual name was something special they dreamed about.

"I take it that things are going well?" Fearow asked, making her look up as he sat on the branch of a tree. She smiled widely at him.

"Oh, Fearow, it's so wonderful! He gave me a name!" Fearow watched her with a look that seemed both happy, and sad at the same time.

"He did, now? How wonderful," replied the great bird.

"Yes! My new name is Zhora!" She was almost bursting with pride and energy.

"I'm glad for you, Zhora." He looked out at the small town from the tree he sat in.

"He's healing very well. The fact he's able to speak again is a good sign, the doctors say." Her mood then turned down as she thought on the issue of what would happen afterwards, when Simon and the others were released from the hospital. "But, they have no home to go back to. Their town was burned down by the humans who enslaved them." Fearow sighed at this.

"Sadly, that is not uncommon. There are many homeless humans in the world." Zhora looked up at him.

"Fearow, how do you know so much about humans?" she asked. Fearow said nothing, didn't move as he looked at the town. As if contemplating, or remembering.

"I've been around them before," was all he said before ruffling his feathers. He looked down at her. "I have to be going for now. Take care of your friend, Zhora." With that, he took wing and flew high into the air, disappearing over the treetops.

It was close to sunset when Zhora returned to Simon's room. She got the feeling, from how Fearow talked, that there was something wrong. He wasn't angry, but seemed . . . sad. Something about humans made him sad. What was it? She shook her head as she walked down the hall. She was surprised that Simon's door was open, and Dr. Nells was there with a nurse, looking at Simon's neck.

"Ah, much better. The wound is almost fully closed, now. I still want to keep you on antibiotics until further notice, but it looks much better!" said Dr. Nells as he looked at Simon's neck, which, while red, was no longer opened up like something from a slasher movie. Simon smiled as best he could. Then, he noticed Zhora.

"Zhora," he greeted softly, surprising Dr. Nells. She smiled in reply.

"Zoro," she replied as she came into the room. Dr. Nells smiled wider at her.

"Well, this is a pleasant surprise. I'm glad to hear him speaking." He looked at Simon. "But don't overdo it. Take it easy on your throat." Simon nodded.

"Yes," Simon rasped. Simon looked at Zhora as the nurse began replacing his bandage. "Hi, Zhora." The nurse stopped and looked at her.

"Zhora? That's a lovely name," she said as she bandaged Simon's throat. Zhora smiled as she sat at the end of the bed. Zhora gently held Simon's hand as the bandages were changed. Thankfully, it didn't hurt near as much as it did when the wound was still so raw and open. Once the nurse was finished, Zhora took her normal spot sitting next to Simon. Dr. Nells smiled, hands on his hips.

"You're improving a lot. At this rate, you'll be better in no time!" Simon gave a weak smile at this, but looked worried, still. Zhora gently wrapped her strong arms around him and held him close, cuddling him.

"Zoro, Zoro," she soothed, gently rocking him. Dr. Nells and the nurse smiled at this.

The days passed, and Simon slowly healed and recovered, but the subject of where he would go was also looming. A small shanty-town had been set up for the surviving slaves, who now numbered less than seventy. Zhora could see the fear, worry and regret in his face at this prospect. She would hold him and rock him, assuring him, no matter what, she would not leave him. She would gladly have him live with her.

Finally, the day came at last when Simon was well enough to be discharged from the hospital. Simon was nervous as he dressed in a fresh pair of jeans, shirt, jacket and shoes. Zhora never left his side for any of it. She smiled softly as she held his hand. "Zoro, Zoroark, Zoro," she said softly, looking into his frightened violet eyes with her won deep-blue orbs. She caressed his cheek gently. She pointed to him, then to herself. Simon blinked.

"Live . . . with you?" he asked. She nodded her head, holding his hand tighter. His shoulders shook as he fought tears. She pulled him into a warm embrace.

"Zoro, Zoroark. Zoro, Zoro," she said as she softly stroked his hair.

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The air was thankfully warm as they left the hospital, a small backpack on Simon's back. Zhora carried the small rose with her. He glanced around the town, and the many Pok mon that were walking around, helping people. Some stopped, greeting them. They all were friendly. Zhora replied to a few as they walked away from the hospital, towards the woods that had been her home for all her life, and now would be his.

As they were approaching the edge of the town, someone called out.

"_Hey, wait!_" They looked back, surprised to see Officer Jenny running up to them, someone following them. "Wait you two!" she shouted as they stopped and Jenny and the man caught up to them.

"Zoro?" Zhora asked, looking at the new human.

He was not quite as tall as Zhora was, with brown hair tied back into a spiky ponytail. He wore glasses and a white coat over tan pants and a funny-looking shirt with palm trees and garish colors.

"Hey, you two. This is Professor Hazel. He said he wanted to talk to you," Jenny panted. Prof. Hazel nodded.

"She told me about you two, and how you seem able to communicate, both in words, and actions," said Prof. Hazel as she stepped forward. Zhora gently slid her arms around Simon's waist.

"A bit," Simon rasped. Prof. Hazel smiled.

"I research Pok  mon language. When I heard about you two, and your predicament, I had an idea: You two help me research Pok  mon language, and I'll give you a place to stay, food to eat. What do you say?" Zhora blinked, surprised at this. She looked down at Simon.

"Zoro?" Simon hummed in thought.

"You two can trust Professor Hazel. He's the best friend Pok  mon have around here!" said Jenny. Simon smiled and Zhora nodded. Prof. Hazel smiled and motioned for them to follow.

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Prof. Hazel's lab was nothing special, a white building, three stories tall, not much bigger than the average house of similar size and shape. A windmill slowly turned on a grassy hill not far. There were trees around and a small creek ran close by. A waterwheel slowly turned as the creek babbled under it. It had a very peaceful feeling to it. Prof. Hazel led them in the front door and into the lab.

It was not very special. There was a large, comfy couch, a large TV screen, desks with computers, stands with Pok  balls and other paraphernalia of Pok  mon training.

"I know it's not much, but it's better than that tent-town they're putting up at the moment," said Prof. Hazel as he led them inside. "I also have a small field out back where the Pok  mon run around and exercise. Since I receive the stored Pok  mon of Trainers in the area, some of your duties will also consist of helping me with them as well." Simon nodded as Zhora looked around, tilting her head as she looked at the odd things in the lab.

"Zoro?" she asked, sniffing the air. Prof. Hazel chuckled.

"I've only ever seen a Zoroark once before. This also will be an interesting chance for study." She looked at him, her ears twitching. Her arms slid around Simon's waist protectively, pulling him gently against her. Prof. Hazel couldn't help a small smile. "You both will be just fine here. Take the first day to get settled in. Here, I'll show you your room," he said as he led them up the stairs and down a hall to where a small, but comfortable bedroom was. Sunlight streamed through the open curtains, a gentle breeze coming through the open window. Zhora stepped forward and placed the small potted rose on the windowsill. Simon smiled as Zhora took a deep breath of the fresh air. They were home.

They spent the rest of the day settling in and learning what they would be doing. Most of it would be helping Prof. Hazel with his language studies and to translate Pok  mon languages. The lab had a nice, friendly feel, more like a home that happened to also be a Pok  mon lab, rather than the other way around. The food was also very good. When it was time to go to bed, they both felt safe and at home.

Zhora crawled into the bed, throwing open the soft, green covers, and opening her arms for Simon. He smiled as he took off his shoes and snuggled in bed against Zhora's warm fur.

"Thank you, Zhora," he said softly in a raspy voice. She smiled and

nodded, pulling the blankets over them.

"Zoroark," she replied. She pulled him close, her chin resting on his head, her mane of red hair covering them both. As they drifted off, she gave him a warm kiss on his hair, humming softly.

The next day, they began to learn their duties, and also met some of the Pok  mon there.

Since Kamera was so dangerous, and so war-torn in many areas, it was far too dangerous for young Pok  mon trainers to go out in many regions. As such, Prof. Hazel had relatively few Pok  mon at his lab, compared to, say Professor Oak of Kanto. However, Prof. Hazel focused in quality over quantity, and put his heart and soul into everything he did. That was especially true for his latest and greatest invention.

"This is what I have been working on for the last seven years," he said as he led them into the workshop, a room like a garage, filled with racks of screws, wires, parts, chips and all manner of things of his inventions.

"Neat," said Simon, rubbing his throat a bit. Prof. Hazel smiled as he led them to a work table, where a device sat, waiting.

It looked like a small, thin box with a little screen, a headset plugged into it. It looked like the little music players some people had, but had a different interface, instead of the little wheel the music device had.

"This is the prototype for the Pok  mon-language translator." He picked it up and showed them. Zhora's ears twitched as she looked at it over Simon's shoulder. "Now, for the time being, I only have the language of Rattata, Pidgey and Pikachu in it, as they have a very simple lexicon. I still have to work and translate the language manually, but I'm working on a program that will automatically translate any Pok  mon language it hears, but that's a few years away." He looked at them, smiling. "So! What I need you two to help me with is translating Zoroark language, as it will be the first more complex language to be programmed, and will help that much more with the translation program. Also, it will help in the future if humans and Zoroark meet." Zhora looked at the device, then to Simon, smiling.

"Zoroark!" she replied happily, liking the idea. Simon smiled as well. He looked at Prof. Hazel.

"So, what do we do first?" Simon asked in his gravelly, whiskey voice.

So, it began. Simon and Zhora began working with Prof. Hazel every day on translating her language so it could be used in the translator. Prof. Hazel provided Simon with a laptop computer to write down and record Zhora's speech. Most of Pok  mon speech was not in the words, but the tone. Certain intonations and subtle rises or falls of tone in the speaking of the words mattered as much as the words themselves. Simon seemed to have a gift for picking it up, and intuiting correctly what was meant, and accurately translating it.

Zhora was also having fun, as she was learning a lot more about human language. Although she understood it, it was another to speak it, which she hoped, someday, she could.

One day, a little over a month after they arrived, Zhora was sitting under a tree on the grass, watching the clouds. Simon was inside, talking with Prof. Hazel and Professor Samuel Oak, who was calling from Kanto, and helping with the translator. She heard the flapping of wings. She looked up, and saw Fearow, gliding in to land in the branches of the tree.

"Fearow! I hadn't seen you in a while! How have you been?" Fearow gave a soft chuckle.

"As well as ever. I see you and your friend now have a home," he stated, looking at the lab. Zhora smiled and nodded.

"Yes. The Professor is kind, and lets us stay and feeds us. And we're learning so many amazing things!" Fearow glanced down at her.

"I'm glad you're happy. How's your friend?" Zhora smiled, ears up, mane flared a bit.

"He's worlds better! His voice is kind of raspy, but I like it like that. He's alive again!" Fearow looked up at the building and sighed.

"There's something I want to give you," said Fearow as he dropped a backpack near her. Zhora's ears perked up. She sniffed, and caught a tiny hint of a smell that was familiar. She opened the bag, and removed a few items. One was a belt with several Pokéballs on it. Next was what she recognized as a Pokédex. It was small, green and looked old. Last was a photograph. She picked it up and looked at it.

A young human was grinning as he posed, a Spearow perched on his shoulder, and a Zorua in his arms. All three of them looked so happy.

"Fearow? What is this? Where did you get this?" There was a long silence.

"That's me and your father, with our Trainer, Evan," he replied. She looked up at him, then back to the photograph.

"I . . . I don't-"

"We were young, back then. All of us. Evan was the most kind, caring and wonderful Trainer a Pokémon could wish for. I was his first Pokémon he caught. He found your father when he was little, wounded on a road where he had been hit by a car. He took care of him, healed him, then was going to let him go. Your father wanted to stay, and he did." She looked at the grinning human boy and his Pokémon, her father and Spearow. The photograph was cracked in places, but the energy and happiness radiated.

"What happened?" Fearow sighed, voice trembling.

"When we came here, we didn't know just how dangerous it was. Evan was just barely fifteen. He thought he could handle it. He had no

idea how violent it was, or that a war was going on." Zhora knew what was coming, dreaded it, but listened anyway. "It was not far from the forest where we have lived most of our lives, and all of yours. We were ambushed by humans armed with guns. They distrusted strangers, and foreigners even less. Your father tried to protect him, so did I. But no Pok  mon is faster than a bullet. We drove them off, but it was too late. We couldn't save Evan."

She looked up, and saw tears in Fearow's eyes, trickling down and softly raining, the tears shimmering in the light. "We buried him, and were now wild Pok  mon. Your father eventually met your mother, who died bringing you into this world. I think, he blamed himself for both losses. I have always known that, in truth, he died of a broken heart." Fearow, who normally was wise and proud, hung his head.

"Oh, Fearow . . ." He looked at her.

"But, your father wanted you to be happy. That was why he hid it from you. He didn't want you to fear humans, and he dearly hoped that you would find a Trainer of your own, someday. It looks like you have." She looked up at Fearow, who, for once, truly smiled happily. Zhora smiled and chuckled.

"Simon isn't my Trainer. He's so much more," she said warmly, feeling herself heat up and feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Fearow watched her and chuckled.

"That's good, Zhora. I'm glad for you. And, wherever they are, I know your father and mother are happy for you, too." She picked up the old Pok  dex and belt of Pok  balls. Fearow smiled gently as he ruffled his feathers. "Take care, Zhora. And take good care of your friend. You never know how precious they are, until you lose them." With that, he took wing and flew over the trees, towards the forest, and was gone. She stared for a long moment, looking down at the items in her paws.

"_Zhora!_" called Prof. Hazel. She looked up to see him waving to her. "Lunch time! Come on in!" he yelled. She stood up, the items clutched to her chest.

The days continued to pass, and Simon and Zhora continued to work to translate her language. As a result, she also learned English, and was trying her best to learn to speak it.

"_Sssssssss-mon,_" she growled, trying to say her friend's name. Simon smiled at her, gently holding her paw.

"Close. Now: Sigh-mohn. Two syllables. Try the first one. Don't give up!" he encouraged. She smiled as she sat at the table, the laptop open by them. She took another deep breath and tried again.

"S-high . . . moan . . .," her ears perked up. Simon smiled wider.

"Really, _really_ close! Once more!"

"Ssssi . . .mon. Ssi-mon . . . Simon. Simon!" He grinned as she got it. She was all smiles as she hugged him. "Simon! Simon!" she repeated it again and again, happy beyond words.

"Great job, Zhora. You see? Don't give up. You didn't on me," he said softly. She smiled and nuzzled him.

"Simon . . ."

Prof. Hazel popped his head in.

"What's all the cheering about?" Zhora grinned as she turned to face him, Simon in her lap.

"Simon! Simon!" Prof. Hazel stared for a moment as Simon grinned.

"Best to start simple, right?" said Simon. Prof. Hazel smiled and nodded.

From there, the research leaped and flew faster than ever before. Now that Zhora was learning English, it made the job of translating that much easier. Simon was also, by the same token, learning Zhora's language. Every day yielded new discoveries and new data.

Finally, as Autumn began to settle, and the leaves began to change to rusty reds, golds, bronzes and yellows, they finally had enough for them to try.

Simon, Zhora and Prof. Hazel sat around the table in the workshop, the translator plugged into the computer as he loaded the data into it. Prof. Hazel gave a sigh as he put the translator on and put the headset on and crossed his fingers.

"All right, here's hoping. Let me switch it on, and we'll start," he said as he turned it on, then looked at Zhora. "Go ahead, Zhora." Her ears twitched as she spoke.

"Zoro, Zoroark, Zoro!" The translator hummed and buzzed for a few seconds.

"_Hello, Mr. Hazel!"_ the translator chirped in perfect English. His eyes were wide as he looked up at them.

"It worked. It worked! It actually worked!" he whooped as he almost leaped in the air, pumping his fist. Zhora hugged Simon tightly at their success.

"This is great, Zhora! We did it!" Simon was all smiles.

"Zoroark! Zoroark, Zor!"

"_I'm so happy! This is wonderful!"_ the translator chimed out, still working. Prof. Hazel, in a blatant display of immaturity, was dancing around like a teen listening to bop music, twisting his hips and tapping his toes.

"Oh, I can't wait to see the look on Oak's face! That old foggy won't believe it!" Prof. Hazel cheered. Simon chuckled.

"Zoro Zoroark, ro Zoro!"

"_You're one to talk, old man!"_ This made Hazel laugh even harder, Simon and Zhora joining in, all three laughing themselves

silly.

After the excitement died down, they tried the translator in reverse, and it worked just as well translating human language into Pok  mon language. It was more than Professor Hazel could ever have dream of.

"This is wonderful! Now we've got it! A few more years, and we can have a universal translator for all Pok  mon languages that works on its own! If we can just do the rough work of translating the language of the most common Pok  mon, we will have what we need for a first-gen model! It may not translate every Pokemon's language, but it will help a lot with the more common ones!" said Hazel as he wrote down notes and grinned at the device. He looked at Simon and Zhora. "And I fully intend to credit you two as well. I never could have done it if not for you two helping me! You have a real talent with Pok  mon languages, my boy!" Simon felt a little embarrassed, scratching his head. Zhora just cooed and cuddled him, proud beyond any words of him.

To celebrate their little success, Prof. Hazel ordered a big pizza, with lots of cheese, pepperoni and olives. Add to that a big bottle of soda, and it made for a wonderful feast! They all felt wonderful, like they had crossed some sort of threshold.

Prof. Hazel watched as Zhora sat with Simon on her lap, happily eating pizza and offering him bites from her slices. It warmed his heart to see how much she cared for the young man. As a Pok  mon Professor, he recognized Zhora's behavior instantly, and it made him smile more. He may have only seen a single Zoroark in person before, but he knew enough about their behavior to know their courting rituals.

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That night, Simon and Zhora sat up later, working on her vocabulary in English. They were still excited, unable and unwilling to sleep after the amazing day.

"I'm just amazed, Zhora. It works!" said Simon as they sat on their shared bed. She was smiling widely.

"Happy, too! Things talk good! Ark!" Simon smiled wider, happy at her warmth.

"I never could have done it without you, Zhora. If not for you, I . . ." he trailed off. She felt his mood changing, and headed it off, wrapping her arms around him and pulling him against her.

"Zhora here. Help, Simon, warm. Zoro. Simon, not scared. Friend, close. Ark." She nuzzled him warmly, her muzzle gently and tenderly brushing his sensitive neck. He clung to her as if his life depended on it, fingers digging into her fur. She held him close, her paw holding the back of his head. She gently rocked back and forth, muttering soft words of warmth and comfort, which he now understood. She pulled back and placed a soft, gentle kiss on the scar that circled his neck.

Over and over, she promised she would never leave him, and he would always be safe around her. Never again would he be treated as he was,

or would he hunger or fear. She would fight for him, and she would protect him. Body and mind. Softly, she eased them down into the soft flannel covers, pulling them over them both, cuddling him close to her. Before they knew it, they were asleep.

The research didn't stop there. Zoroark were only one of many Pok mon in the world, whose language needed to be translated and added. They had only just begun! Next, Simon was to work with some of Prof. Hazel's other Pok mon and translate their language and help add it to the database. Until they complete the algorithm, they would have to translate the old-fashioned way. While they waited until they were ready, Simon worked more with Zhora to improve her speech.

"He who believes shall see," said Zhora, reciting from a book of prayers to Arceus. Simon was also teaching her to read, which she was _very_ excited to learn. Simon smiled and nodded.

"Very good. You're getting better every day, Zhora! I'm so amazed at you." She smiled at his praise.

"I have a good teacher!" Simon blushed a tiny bit, which was five shades of adorable to her.

In the time that had passed, Zhora had learned a lot. She got better every day. She also watched TV to learn more English, and to learn more about humans. More than a few times, that had caused a little trouble or embarrassment, but it still helped in the long run. Simon smiled as he closed the thick book.

"That's enough for today, I think." Zhora smiled and pulled him against her, cuddling him. Simon chuckled. "I'm so lucky to have a wonderful friend like you, Zhora." She pulled back and brushed a strand of brown hair from his lovely violet eyes

"So am I," she replied. Simon hugged her, and she hummed happily.

Through the winter, they worked on translating more languages, with Simon learning Lopunny and Buneary, a little Blastoise and some Mankey. By the time spring came, Simon had almost learned five Pok mon languages. Their goal was to have a good fifteen at a minimum for the translator before it went into production and testing, with twenty-five being more desired. Again, they were placing the emphasis on common and Starter Pok mon, as translations of them were the most likely to be needed. Prof. Hazel was working closely with Prof. Oak and how the Pok dex was programmed and made. He hoped to make it able to be upgraded through downloads of new data and languages as needed.

Spring found Simon and Zhora walking and admiring the scenery. They had not really left Prof. Hazel's lab since they arrived. Now, almost a year since they met, the small town seemed different. It seemed a little brighter, somehow. People didn't seem as worried or sad as they had been.

Some faces they recognized, some they didn't. Here and there, Simon recognized the faces of a few other former-slaves. It was strange. They had not even spent a whole day outside the hospital together. It was almost surreal.

"_Hey, you two!"_ yelled a voice they recognized. They turned and saw Officer Jenny running up to them.

"Hello, Officer," greeted Simon. She looked taken aback by his deep, gravelly voice that didn't seem to fit his tall, lanky appearance.

"Good to see you two again. How've you been?" she asked. Simon smiled as Zhora slid her arm around his waist.

"Much better," he replied. Jenny smiled wider at this.

"That's great to hear! The rest have settled in very well. Everybody found a place around here, than Arceus." Simon smiled and nodded. Jenny looked at him, her smile fading somewhat. "We also have everyone who . . . didn't make it, buried in the cemetery. They all have graves and markers." Simon looked down at the dirt of the road. Zhora pulled him against her, rubbing his shoulder.

"What about the slavers?" Simon asked. Jenny's face twitched and she almost spat.

"Firing squad," she replied simply. Zhora gave a huff of agreement.

"Good," said the Zoroak, shocking Jenny. Simon smiled.

"Officer, this is Zhora." Zhora extended her hand, smiling. Jenny smiled as she shook Zhora's paw.

"Nice to meet you, Zhora. Thank you for the help before. You're a real hero." Zhora looked both embarrassed, and proud.

"Nobody should be treated that way. Human or PokÃ©mon," said Zhora with conviction. Jenny nodded her agreement. She noticed Simon looking around.

"Officer, do you mind if I ask-?" Jenny smiled sadly.

"The cemetery is that way," she said, pointing to the north-west.

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It was quiet and solemn as they entered the bricked graveyard as they walked through the wrought iron gates. The grass was soft, and a few Pidgey were singing here and there. Zhora was right with him, her hand holding his as they walked among the graves.

"Simon . . . are you sure?" she asked. Simon nodded as they walked among the stones.

He noticed some were visibly newer than the others. The graves of the slaves who had died. Forty-six graves. Some had names and dates, others had a different message: _**"Here, in eternal peace, rests an innocent victim of hate, known only to Arceus. R.I.P."**_ They walked among the graves, until they found the one they were searching for. Simon trembled as he fell to his knees, Zhora holding him gently in her arms as his fingers brushed the words engraved there:

**Here lies **

**Helen Morris**

**Aged 17**

**Beloved sister, gentle soul.**

**R.I.P.**

Simon could not read the text for long, as his vision began to blur with tears. He sniffled as Zhora held him close.

"Hi, sis. Sorry it took me so long to come." Simon was silent for a few long moments. He swallowed, his throat tight from both the scars, and his grief. He hung his head. "I-I'm sorry, that I didn't do more. That I didn't protect you. Some big brother I am, huh? At least you're with Mom and Dad, now." He sniffled and wiped his stinging eyes. Zhora gently hugged him, letting him know she was there. "This is Zhora. She helped me, and freed everyone else. She's the hero I wish I had been able to be." At this last, he almost came apart. Zhora pulled him against her, gently stroking his hair.

"That's not true, Simon. You were, and you are very brave. It's not your fault, and your sister doesn't blame you. That, I know," she said as she pulled him close, until he was in her lap. With her taller frame, he easily fit in her shadow, snuggled against her and safe. "It's all right, Simon. I'm right here. Shh. It's all right," she soothed as she just rocked him and let him cry.

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Zhora held Simon's hand firmly in hers as they walked home to the lab.

"I'm sorry, Zhora." She looked at him. "That you had to see that." She shook her head.

"No, Simon. You have nothing to apologize for. You've held it in long enough. Everybody cries, at some point." Simon looked up at her as she smiled warmly, gently swinging his arm. "You went through a horrible nightmare. I don't blame you at all. You lost you only family, and almost died yourself. You were scared and didn't know what was going to happen. I'd be surprised if you didn't. But, always remember that I'm here for you." She smiled at him. "If you need to cry, I'll be there to hold and snuggle you until you're better. And I promise I'll never tell anyone else." Simon felt a few new tears, wiping his face.

"Thank you, Zhora. I don't know why only now is it coming out." She looked up at the setting sun.

"It's almost been a year. It brings back memories." Simon looked up and nodded.

"Yeah. You're right. I think this was the day they came and burned the village down. We were traveling for weeks. When people couldn't go on, they just left them. Like me and Helen." Zhora hugged him.

"If you ever need to talk about it, I'm right here." He nodded as she cradled him in her arms.

They walked past the lab and sat under the tree on the grassy hill, watching the sun set.

Zhora held him in her arms as they watched the fiery disk of the sun slowly lower towards the mountains, painting all the world in golden hues as the sun slowly disappeared beyond the Eltir mountains to the West.

"Beautiful, isn't it? Simon asked. Zhora looked at him as the last rays of the sun made his face seem to glow. His eyes sparkled like beautiful gems as she gazed deeply into them, her heart beating fast, her insides warm and fuzzy.

"It is," she replied as she drew closer, holding his gaze, his hands held tenderly in hers. Her ears laid back a tiny bit as they leaned closer, the setting sun shining between the two of them.

"_Simon! Zhora! Supper!_" Pref. Hazel called, snapping them out of it. She almost growled, helping Simon up.

"_Damn,"_ she mentally cursed. She sighed and smiled at Simon, whose face looked flushed.

"Let's get some food," he said as they walked towards the lab. Zhora hummed her agreement.

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That night, Zhora sat on their bed as Simon showered, thinking on that moment they had under the tree. Whenever she held Simon, she felt happy. His smile made her tingle inside, and his tears made her feel like her insides were being ripped apart. When she held his hand in her paws, she felt . . . right. She felt as if she was where she belonged.

She was brought out of her thoughts by the door opening and Simon stepping inside, ruffling his hair with a towel, dressed in fresh pajamas.

"Ah, much better!" he said as he sat on the bed. Zhora smiled more as she watched him. Simon was so wonderful and endearing to her. The shape of his nose, his chin. The color of his hair and skin, his slim fingers, cute lips. She trembled slightly as she took in his features, thinking on what she liked and why. She gazed at him with lidded eyes, her look dreamy as she watched his hands work with the towel. Her eyes caught the scars around his poor wrists. She felt her heart tighten, feeling she had to wrap her arms around him and hold him and never let go.

Simon finished with the towel and set it aside. He looked at her, and saw the slightly glazed, dreamy look to her face. "Zhora? You okay?" he asked. She smiled as she came closer, on all fours.

"Has anyone ever told you how cute you are?" Simon blinked, not quite sure how to respond. Zhora reached out and gently brushed a strand of damp hair from his eyebrow. She gave a husky chuckle as she drew closer, her nose almost touching his. "And you have . . . such lovely

eyes," she whispered. Before he could reply, her lips were on his. He gasped softly as her arms gently encircled his back, pulling him close to her as she gently caressed his lips with her own.

Zhora had seen how human mates would do this on the TV, but she didn't like the ones that almost looked like they were biting each other. This was soft and gentle, a feather-soft touch of warmth and tenderness. Maybe it left some to be desired in terms of technique, but it had all the feelings she could not put into words. She moaned softly into the kiss as she pulled him against her, pulling him with her backwards as she reclined back on the bed, her arms never letting go. With a soft smack, they separated. Simon's face was flushed, and Zhora could feel her man standing up, along with her fur as she gazed into his eyes with glazed eyes.

"Zhora," he breathed. She gave him a quick peck on the lips. It was now or never.

"I love you, Simon," she said softly, her voice deep, husky, but tender. She stroked his hair as she smiled warmly at him. "I've loved you since I first saw your lovely eyes." Simon trembled against her, feeling a few tears begin to sting. She kissed them away without a thought or word. "When I held your hand, and you looked at me, so scared and alone, I wanted to keep you warm and safe, always. I know that's not the way it works among humans, but I want to be there for you. I want to protect you, and be there with you. I would give anything to be your mate . . . if you'd have me." Simon swallowed the lump in his throat.

"Zhora . . . I l-love you, too." She wrapped arms around him, holding him close, snuggled in her warm fur. "When I first woke up, I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. All I really saw was your eyes and your mane, but I felt safe. I didn't know why, but I felt warm. I felt, if I could trust anybody, I could trust you." She nuzzled him softly.

"You always can. I'm always here for you, my sweet Simon." She took one of his hands and tenderly kissed it, planting soft, warm kisses on his fingers and palm. She held the palm to her cheek as she looked deeply into his eyes, violet meeting ultramarine-blue. She leaned up and gently captured his lips with her own, their warmth mixing. She broke the kiss and pulled him down until he was laying on top of her. She stroked his hair lovingly as she pulled the blankets up over them, bringing them closer than ever before, and it felt right. It felt as if two pieces of a puzzle had fallen into place.

Sure they might not fit the mold of what others thought a couple should be. Zhora, the female, might be taller and stronger than Simon, but they loved and trusted each other as no other. Zhora hummed as she gently pulled back. "Warm?" she asked. Simon smiled as he nodded. She pulled him against her, his face nestled against her neck.

"I love you, Zhora." She smiled, kissing his hair.

"And I love you. I have you, now. And I'm never letting you go . . ."

****The End****

End
file.